

Nandini Sahu's *Sita*: Retelling Poetic Memoir of the Protagonist

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ABSTRACT

The long poem on Sita is a retelling of the old mythical story of Sita in which Sita is every woman, with all their strength and all their weaknesses. The poet is much aggrieved by her grandfather's reaction to Sita's pleading with mother earth to take her back from this life. For her, Sita is not only Sita of Ramayana, but she has been an epitome of our culture and civilization and shaper of the whole Indian womanhood. Her Sita is the one who talks about her notions on love, care, joy dejection, humiliation and appraisal and generosity. Her assessment of the doings of Maryada Purushottam Rama is a biting one, which leaves the readers to think again about Sita and reframe their attitude about her, who was a true seeker of the truth. Hence, it is proper to admit that "It is penned rather as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic Sita told in the first-person narrative".

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The magnum opus of Sita, which "has always been shaping itself in her subconscious", is "a whole new take on Indian epic. According to Bibhu Padhi, a well-known Indian English poet, "This long poem is on one of the most respected characters in Indian literature and culture. Its choric voice uses its repetitions and songlike quality towards a dramatic effect. There is something almost mantric about it. The strength of the poem lies in its lyrical intensity, epic aspirations and its tonal variations. (Sahu iv) The long poem on Sita is a retelling of the old mythical story of Sita in which Sita is every woman, with all their strength and all their weaknesses. The poet is much aggrieved by her grandfather's reaction to Sita's pleading with mother earth to take her back from this life. For her, Sita is not only Sita of Ramayana, but she has been an epitome of our culture and civilization and shaper of the whole Indian womanhood. She says:

To me, Sita is the strongest woman in any mythology in the world. I would rather say, Sita lives in our collective consciousness as a powerful inspiration on the spirit of all progressive, independent women, with or without their knowledge of it." (Sahu ix)

Her patience, courage and perseverance are examples of an ideal life for woman. At the beginning of the poem, the poet calls her with various names like 'Sita, Janaki, Vaidehi and Ramma and considers her as a role model for Indian women.

The poet introduces about "the woman who adopted her self-imposed exile / the woman whom time and again patriarchy finds safe/ to evict in her emancipated consciousness." (Sahu 1) Sita

was a woman with indomitable willpower who actually "never given up./ Come back she has from the segments of mother Earth, to live in me, in you,/ in the mass consciousness of the universe." (Sahu 1) Every woman is Sita, whether she is president of India, Prime Minister of Indian or any working mother or "the gang raped girl/ in the Delhi bus at night, and the/ battered baby girl in the AIIMS trauma center." (Sahu 2) Sita is the most enlightened and eternal woman who introduces herself as "I am a deathless goddess, ever alive in each woman/ you encounter. My quintessential story, reverberating from/ the traps of Earth-Mother, is no vain-claim." (Sahu 8) Patriarchal norms are again at stake when Sita questions the parents' traditional trend of choosing a suitable husband for her daughter which is not fine with the conscious woman like Sita and showing the physical strength cannot be the ground of man's being an ideal future husband. She says, "I pondered over idea of father's choice of a groom for me-/how could the Swayamvar be interrogated thus? The choice of/ husband should be the woman's prerogative, not father's/ preconditions of the physical strength of a man! Shouldn't love/be the agent to map the interplay of the future, text and context of a/ complete connubial? Does strength qualify one to win a woman's heart?" (Sahu 11) The poet also gives a glimpse of modern times where marriage custom is no less changed, and parents still think about their perspectives of old age and support and not barely for the sake of well-being of their children like "Even today, parents beget daughters with hope of a son;/ girls queue up paving the way for a boy; and one day, the girls are married off to prospective grooms, whose stipulation could be/ a decent job, an affluent family, a teetotaler, maybe, two horoscopes/ to be matched by a Pundit, and family's alliances. Marriage in the/ absence and isolation of love and desire happens!" (Sahu 11)

As the representative voice of the modern woman, Sita pictures all the tormentation of a girl soon going to be married. They are sacrificed at the altar of nuptial fire. Sita sings sorrowfully:

I, Mathili, incarnations of Meera, Radha, Laxmi, Rupa, Satrupa Aseema, am caught in the endless helix of the/ mortal adventure, seeking repetition of/ the ancient mythical, cyclic whirl. No count/ I am speaking my words now, lying bereaved/ on the lap of my mother, Vasundhara, the/ mother Earth; your memories are sinking/ deep within the mind's courier. There is a/ bride burning, here a girl child is/ doomed." (Sahu 13)

The modern Sita, with all progressive thoughts, wishes to soar high in the sky of freedom relinquishing all doubts about purity and innocence. She sings beautifully:

I can see, woman, no more you are the
holiness and the power – epithet
of dignity, potency, magnificence, compassion,

love, splendor. You aren't adored
like Maheswari or Saraswati. Wake up to
the call of Nirbhaya, let them call it blasphemy. (Sahu 18)

Women are desired as a commodity for aeons of time. Firstly, a swayamvar held; then after marriage, she could not stop demons being allured by her beauty in the forest. She says:

Many a demon hovered, charmed by the
magnetism of my bounty, wished to possess
me like a haughty object, like Kubera's
treasure or the Pushpaka aircraft. Yes
my lord, woman is an entity of desire
forever, then and now, in this antagonistic world. (Sahu 25)

The narration of Hanuman's visiting Sita in Ashok Vatika is beautiful from the point of view of both natural beauty and human emotions. And Hanuman's narrating the whole meeting with Sita to Ram shows Lord Rama's anxiety about meeting her wife. Lord Rama Asks Hanuman:

Oh Hanuman, the world will worship
you for ages to come, for being such
fearless, and a true devotee of Siya-Ram.
Now tell me of the flame of my heart,
my beloved Sita, the piercing ache of her
loneliness, which is deeper like the labyrinth.
Does Janaka-Nandini, the tapaswini,
take good care of her being? Do the Wind,
Sun and Moon Gods see her silent suffering? (Sahu 44)

Sita was an entirely devoted wife, honest daughter and civilized bride. When Ravana took her to Lanka, she became a puppet at the hands of Ravana there. When Rama wins the battle with Ravana, he does not wish to see Sita in isolation, rather he meets his wife Sita in public. At this, Sita becomes aghast, as what has happened to her dear Rama who fought the whole battle to relieve her from the clutches of the demon king, Ravana:

The propriety, the chastity of a woman is
after all resolute by her destiny!
She was solely responsible for this war, this disaster.

Let her meet me in full public view;
no more concerned am I to be her lone admirer.
The melting picture of this woman doesn't touch me anymore".
I was confused, stupefied, what happened
to my love, to his protective sovereignty, my dear!!
I felt nude, defenseless, with a grim cordon of fear. (Sahu 69)

Lord Rama's abandoning Sita breaks her heart to the core, and she feels cheated and dishonoured and tells Rama that if she had known all this falsehood earlier, she would have ended her life by jumping into the fire because leading a life of disgrace and torment, is impossible for her. She says, "Time will remember this, Aryaputra, for ages to come. /How inexplicable righteousness can put a woman to shame /and how fundamental and malicious denunciation is the right /of a man!" (Sahu 72) Poet's motto in delineating the long-heard story of Sita becomes more apparent when she says:

For some women, typically for the feminists and extremists,
'Sita' is tantamount with willful torment and pain
uncomplaining of women's low status with humiliation.
But they must read my story as the story of a woman
rather than as mandate openhanded holy texts
like the Gita, Bhagabat, the Bible or the Quran. (Sahu 74)

Then comes the second exile of Sita when a washerman comes to Lord Rama to seek justice for his wife. Lord Rama has to abandon Sita again to set an ideal before his subjects. Laxman revolts against such a decision of Rama, "I set the funeral pyre for Mata Sita/ As she ordered, but fire God couldn't smolder her./ How can meaningless gossip drive you this far?/ She is the immaculate woman, she is purer than pure./ Do not ask me to perform this brutal action anymore." (Sahu 87) Lakshman does not feel it right whatever Lord Rama is doing with Sita. He keeps on expressing his anger:

I treat her as my mother, and you are
asking a son to desert her in the jungle
without informing her, pitiless and irrational?
In the foul and fair days of Ayodhya
she had the courage to bear all pain and pleasure.
Does Ayodhya lack tolerance, brother, you too are such unfair!"

I had desired to revisit the hermitage,

but oh Rama! My Lord, couldn't you meet me once?

I was deserted by you for the thrust of pride and obligation! (Sahu 87)

The peace and satisfaction she could not get throughout her life, she at last found it in the Ashram of Maharishi Valmiki. She said, "For the first time I understood true solidarity./ The women in the ashram were amazed, pleased/ to serve me; it was, for me, true home coming". (Sahu 91) For Sita, that ashram became a home incarnate where she could get what she could not get throughout her life. She says, "Forest became home for me, yet the trauma sustained./ Mother Earth and father Valmiki healed my bereaved soul./ I got that lost sisterhood from the hermitresses." (Sahu 92) The generosity of the woman is heart-rending when in Uttar-kand, at Maharishi Valmiki's hermitage, Sita is seen "floating pensively in the sea of memories of" (Sahu 94) her husband and children were growing watching her smiling face. She lost herself in the care and breeding of her children and forgot all that happened with her in the past. "Now my mind had matured to a peaceful disposition/ all discord spent. I forgave and forgot all/ injustice done to me, focused on my sons twin." (Sahu 95) When Lord Rama goes to the hermitage of Maharishi Valmiki for the fulfilment of Ashvamedha Yajna, he decides to take back Sita again. Still, before this, he again desires, Sita must undergo a fire test to prove her purity and innocence. At this, Laxman gets angry and says:

Brother, Mata Sita

had given a fire-test in Lanka, to which I am the witness.

Kindly spare the Iksvaku clan of the

Shame of testing the purest woman one more time.

Think of Lava and Kusha who grew up into teenagers

without knowing what family and paternal love mean. (Sahu 104)

The poet Nandini as the mouthpiece of Sita, talks in a sarcastic tone with each character of the epic. She also does not leave Lakshman without telling her about his irresponsibility and how he deviated from them:

I smoldered with bitterness, sullenness, and said,

"Who are you expecting to adorn justice to

a woman, Lakshmana? From the one who had

discreetly, pusillanimously forsaken his pregnant wife

and put the responsibility on your shoulder to

convey the sentence of exile to her before thirteen years?

From the father who didn't worry to enquire

if his offspring saw the light of the day safe and sound? (Sahu 104)

The chastity of a woman is so transient that it breaks with a little jerk, and at this, poet's Sita argues boldly, "tell me honestly, if a/ woman lost chastity, virginity as a result of an attack, / is it her responsibility? Do her body or mind transform once her/ body is violated? Does her mind transmute itself and is her love lost? Isn't it a mere calamity, misfortune on her part without her fault?" (Sahu 106)

Tormented by such ultimate humiliation, Sita requests mother Earth to take her back in her lap and then, the earth under her feet divides and takes her into her lap. Lord Rama calls her with benign names at this, but it is of no use now. All the questions of Sita to Rama are unanswerable as her love, loyalty, veneration and chastity for Ram cannot be challenged. And in the end, Lord Rama's rejection at the hands of Sita becomes a matter of regaining all her lost dignity. The poet broods:

The world still does debates about Sita's purity and pollution.

By contrast, Sita's silent living out life as doled out to her
minus enormous arguments speaks her conviction.

Your rejection of Sita is comprehensively judged by the world
as unacceptable, but my rejection of Rama is believed as
an illustration of highest dignity of a just woman. (Sahu 129)

Thus, we can say that Nandini Sahu's Sita is the Sita of our contemporary times. Her Sita is the one who talks about her notions on love, care, joy dejection, humiliation and appraisal and generosity. Her assessment of the doings of Maryada Purushottam Rama is a biting one, which leaves the readers to think again about Sita and reframe their attitude about her, who was a true seeker of the truth. Hence, it is proper to admit that "It is penned rather as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic Sita told in the first-person narrative". (Sahu Blurb) The book is a document which offers poetic justice to Sita and, through this "long narrative", successfully salutes the "spirit of woman" who succeed in leading a meaningful life against all odds.



Works Cited:

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